The Accumulation of Crime and Punishment: The Ancient Daoist Notion of “Inherited Burden” and its Relevancy Today

著者	Kikuchi Noritaka
journal or publication title	Journal of International Philosophy
number	1
page range	194-198
year	2012-03-31
URL	http://doi.org/10.34428/00008174

Panel Presentation

The Accumulation of Crime and Punishment: The Ancient Daoist Notion of "Inherited Burden" and its Relevancy Today

Kikuchi Noritaka

Introduction

We who are part of the Third Unit at the International Research Center for Philosophy are engaged in exploring topics related to the concept of *kyosei* (harmonious coexistence). However, before we think about *kyosei*, we must tackle the issue of life itself, and this is something about which different peoples hold very diverse views. For, indeed, we live in a world of many diverse cultures, diverse practices, worldviews and diverse values. What, then, is required? First and foremost what is required is an acceptance of diversity. It is from this affirmation of diversity that our respect for others comes. In addition, by accepting diversity, we can experience our own connection to others. And, from this, we can begin our path toward harmonious coexistence.

On this theme, I would like to explore the two thousands year old Chinese concept of *chengfu* (inherited burden). The notion of *chengfu* refers to the notion that crimes and transgressions can accumulate and be passed down to following generations. What relevance does this ancient Chinese concept have for us today? Can it inform solutions we may come up with in our meditations over contemporary issues? Could this East Asian concept have a universal currency in the rest of the world? Or is this not an appropriate question? These are some of the issues this paper will seek to explore.

1. The burden of inherited sin

In the later Han dynasty (2nd century CE), Gan Ji obtained what is known as the "sacred 170 chapter book." This fact was written about in the official Chinese historical work, the *Book of the Later Han* (1). The sacred book was called the *Taiping Qingling Shu* (Book of Great Peace). Based on yin-yang philosophy, the book was comprised of many miscellaneous tales about shamans (*wu xi*). With wu referring to female shamans and xi referring to male shamans, they were collectively referred to as *wu xi*, and this book is full of their strange and mysterious sayings. The book was presented by one of Gan Ji's disciples to the emperor but was put aside; it was later picked up by Zhang Jiao.

Zhang Jiao (more commonly known as Jiang Jue) was a daoist practioner and sorcerer who gathered many followers. Starting a movement named after the *Taiping Qingling Shu*, called *Taiping Dao* (the Way of Great Peace), he became known for his work curing the sick. During the Zhongping era (184-189 CE) of the later Han dynasty Emperor Ling's reign, Zhang led an uprising against the regime. He gathered hundreds of thousands of people north of the Yellow River, in the region along the river's lower course. The rebellion, taking its name from the yellow scarves worn by its sympathizers, is known as the Yellow Turban Rebellion. It was an age when large landowners and clans increasingly held the power. Exploiting farmers and the lower classes, it led to a breakdown in village community life. As large parts of the population lost their land to become servants, flooding along the Yellow River was causing famine. It was one of the rare examples of severe population decline in Chinese history. A large group of refugees came together, rising up in rebellion. The rebellion resulted in an enormous loss of life and was eventually put down, but the following decade it rose up again, becoming what was ancient China's most

significant religious revolt. The rebellion ultimately caused the downfall of the Later Han dynasty, during the reign of Emperor Xian in 220.

What was behind the great power of the *Taiping Dao* movement? And what became in later times of its founding text the *Taiping Qingling Shu*?

Part of the daoist canon of texts, the *Tai-ping jing* comprised a work of 119 chapters. Only a fragmentary 57 chapters survives and this fragment is thought to be all that remains of the *Taiping Qingling Shu*. A copy of the work also was preserved at Dunhuang. Despite being only a fragment, it is a substantial text containing a wealth of information about the ancient daoist worldview and existential outlook (2). Indeed, it provides a panoramic glimpse of Chinese religious philosophy. What, though, does this text have to say to us today?

In the beginning, daoists believed the world was harmonious and seamlessly so, for peacefulness was the essence of the world. This state of perfection, however, could not last forever—and before long discord spread and the world fell into a state of imbalance. This pessimistic vision lies dormant in the text and is what informs the daoist vision of a history in decline.

In ancient China, people had an image of a past golden age of great peace. Indeed, this is a consciousness that might still be with the Chinese of today. Even back in the second century BCE in the Book of Rites (*Li ji*), we find descriptions of this ancient time characterized as a time of *da-tong* (great unity). Great unity and great peace were related images in the Chinese mind. And, in contrast to this, the present day was held to be a time when the "path of peace" had been forgotten resulting in an age of decline *xiaokang* (3). In this age of decline, while people were basically materially well off, because they lacked virtue they remained unable to achieve the great unity of the past. Disparaging this state of affairs, Tao Yuanming in the fifth century encouraged a "return to agriculture" and to the rural life. Praising the lofty self-sufficiency and wisdom of the ancients, he wrote: "Long ago in high antiquity, when people first appeared, they were free of delusion and self-sufficient, embracing simplicity, true to their nature."

In the past was a golden age. The present was one of decline. The *Taiping Qingling Shu* explained this decline in terms of the notion of *chengfu*. "The inheritance came from before while the burden comes later." In the golden age of the past, the people/sages of antiquity possessed hearts in harmony with the virtuous mind-heart of heaven. Slowly, however, they lost this. This transgression of the heart began to accumulate. This became the sin with which the later generation became burdened, causing many calamities. Therefore, in this way transgressions from the past became an inherited burden (4).

People commit transgressions. These crimes are something that cannot be accounted for in terms of our individual lives and are rather carried down and inherited as sin by the next generation. This sin goes beyond the problem of any individual person being expanded to include an entire society (which is itself made up of a composite of individuals). This results in ineffective government and warfare. It also affects the natural world, being seen in poor crops and natural disasters. This sin is then accumulated and increases, and from the beginning of the world has continued and expanded. The *Tai-ping jing* discusses the "inherited burden of emperors and the people from the beginnings of the world" (5). Mankind, then, is burdened with a sin that has accumulated from the very beginnings of the universe, over the great expanse of time.

Despite this state of affairs, the world continues. The universe continues without pause. And the world moves in great cycles or repetitions. This is what the ancients believed to be the laws of heaven and earth. They also believed that when harmony returned to the world that this would likewise expand and the harmonious golden age of the past would return again.

2. An inter-connection between nature and humankind

At the heart of the *Tai-ping jing* is a vision of the world as undergoing great cycles of peace and strife. It saw the current times as being at the end of one great cycle and standing on the cusp of a new time of great peace, which would cover everything in a spirit of new purity. This new age would happen with the fall of the Han dynasty. And, followers of the *Taiping Dao* were working to bring this about. In this way, the reality of the destruction of the Han was linked in neural terms to religious ideals. However, the religious rebellion that followed would provide a more unified interpretation of the religious and

the political.

In the end, the followers of the *Taiping Dao* movement were unable to bring about their ideal society. However, the underlying beliefs of their movement worked its way into the fabric of Chinese philosophy. Indeed, it was probably because the ideals proved impossible to bring about that promoted their continuation.

How, though, are natural calamities viewed as resulting from human sin?

Nature brings many blessings. It also brings threats. Its movement appears arbitrary to us and yet one wonders if no-one can foresee what will come next. In ancient China, people began speculating from very early times about the correlation between the human world and the natural world; speculating about whether there was not some connection between them. The ancient Chinese wondered whether there was not some cause and effect relation between the workings of the human world and that of nature. It was in the Confucian philosophy of the Han dynasty that people began to speculate on the nature of calamities and disasters and it was thought that omens, portents, disasters, visitations, and calamities are all directly resulted in and correlated with human actions. And, in some cases are admonishments from Heaven.

Early Han dynasty Emperor Wu, upon his enthronement, sought the opinion about proper governance from Confucian scholar Dong Zhongshu. Their dialogues were written about in the *Book of Han*. The emperor asked Dong Zhongshu about the causes of natural calamities. And, Dong replied: "When the country has taken a wrong path and transgressions are committed, the first thing heaven does is to admonish the people with calamity. If the people do not reflect on this, then heaven will cause other strange phenomena to occur in warning." (6) This view can be found in the Confucian classical historical text, *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, as something that had been passed down as a self-evident truth in the past. For it was stated that the "relationship between heaven and humankind is an illumination of each other."

If the ruler is virtuous within his mind and with regard to the people, then what can we expect of the world? Zhong replied that then "there will be harmony of yin and yang, and the winds and rains will come as expected. The people will work together and be productive. The five grains will bear fruit and the plants will become luxuriant. That between heaven and earth will become moist and the entire world will become plentiful. This harmony in all things with peace in the world will happen based on correct and virtuous governing of the kingdom. However, should governance fall into chaos, everything else will thereby be badly affected." (7)

Dong Zhongshu is known as the founder of the *Spring and Autumn School* and the doctrine of the *Interactions between Heaven and Mankind*. The doctrine states that by looking at disasters, visitations, and calamities, we can understand the will of Heaven for these are Heaven's signs to us. Stability and prosperity are things which result from good governance, and natural disasters, visitations, and calamities are clear signs of misgovernance. As these natural signs are things which have already in fact occurred, they are clear signs from heaven of the need for reflection by the ruler. Thus, natural disasters, visitations, and calamities are understood as related to human action and demand a change in terms of an ethico-moral human action. This is still a step away from the later Han dynasty daoist notion of *chengfu* but its roots are certainly in this early understanding.

3. Punishment: The individual versus the group

What, then, is the difference between daoist "inherited burden" and Buddhist "karma"?

In Buddhism, no matter what action there is, there is a cause. Every action in due time sees its effect or repayment. If the action was good, then the effect will be good, and if the action was bad, then the effect will be bad. This is something that occurs on the level of individual human life, but sometimes the effects are not felt in that individual's life. We have surely all experienced this happening in our own lives.

If we had only one lifetime, then this karma would be severed. But, in India, people do not believe there is only one lifetime for us. After death, we are reincarnated and this continues on repeatedly. For this reason, even if the effect of a certain cause is not experienced in this lifetime, we know that it will surely occur sometime over the course of our many lifetimes and this becomes the cause for what kind of reincarnation we will come to have. Good and bad karma, therefore, follow with us in

reincarnation. Good and bad karma accumulates and we carry it with us, for our karma is something from which we can never escape.

This is, however, something which functions on the level of the individual. Crimes committed by a person become karmic effects for that individual and that karmic burden will be carried through many lifetimes of the same person. It is not something that can be passed to someone else. It is said that the "sins of the parents become that of the children," but according to Buddhism this could never be so. In orthodox Buddhism at least the transgressions of our ancestors are not passed down to us. In that way, karma does not function on the level of society and this is the fundamental difference between Buddhism and Daoism when it comes to transgression and sin.

Past transgressions are burdens now and in our future. This is a notion shared between South and East Asia. However, in South Asia, it is something that functions on the level of an individual person. In East Asia, this cause and effect relation is expanded to function on the level of groups of people. In East Asia, it is the family or clan that forms the basic unit, and according to the "Words on Texts," which is the seventh wing of the Yi-Jing (*Book of Changes*), "The family that accumulates goodness is sure to have abundant happiness, and the family that accumulates evil is sure to have abundant misery." (8) The "Words on Texts" is part of the commentary known as the Ten Wings, which is believed to have been written by Confucius. Written from the Confucian perspective, the text is significant. Daoism, which has many conflicting aspects with Confucianism, was also based on Confucian philosophy and has absorbed many aspects as well. And this notion of a father's sin being passed down to his children is something that could even be said to be a traditional Chinese convention.

Buddhism also sees time occurring in repeating spans whereby the world is created, expands, is destroyed, and extinguished—before being reborn. This happens unendingly. In the early 5th century the Shi-ji jing (*Description of the World Sutra*), part of the *Long Āgama Sutra*, was translated into Chinese. According to this text, this repeating span of time whereby the world is created, evolves, degenerates, and is extinguished is called the Four Kalpas (or four eons). This occurs over vast periods of time and is a natural cycle. It is not governed by any intention and is not informed or affected by human action—not by the actions of kings or by human karma.

According to Chinese philosophy, the world is repeatedly regenerated through the increasing and decreasing of yin and yang energies. When heaven and earth decay, there they have their beginnings. This means that the golden age of great peace of ancient times will come again. This is a very different concept from the Prophesy of the coming of a New Jerusalem, for it does not posit the coming into existence of something new on earth. Rather it is a return of a golden age which lay in the past. Thus, in East Asia, in reality government draws from religion. In South Asia, government and religion are quite distinct, while in West Asia, we find religion incorporated into government. These all stand vividly in contrast with each other.

Conclusion

To build links with the rest of the world in terms of philosophy is one of the main aims of the International Research Center for Philosophy. For this reason, it is crucial for us to recognize the differences in worldview and philosophy that exist throughout time and place. From an understanding of the fundamental different points, we can thereby grasp the things that unite us. This will also enable us to engage in true dialogue.

In addition, can we not find something in all of this that would not speak to our present condition? What approach is possible for today? Perhaps what we in The International Research Center for Philosophy's Third Unit can do through our engagement with traditional philosophy and religions is to uncover the origins of the issues we face today and to work to uncover solutions in the heritage of the great wisdom of the past. In my opinion, original ideas come about in the context of certain ages, certain places or under specific circumstances, and the more unique and distinct something is, in some regard is carries what is universal within it. Perhaps the notion of accumulated sin being seen as the cause of natural calamities is not a concept with universal application, and yet in terms of man-made calamities this certainly has significance for us in today in Japan.

Notes:

(1) *Book of the Later Han*, Chapter 30 (Zhonghua Shuju Publishing, 1965), p.1084.

(2) There are many discussions of the *Tai-ping jing*. The books cited below are concise and thorough references. Kamitsuka Yoshiko, *Taihei-kyo no sekai* (*The World of the Tai-ping jing*), *Dokyo no kamigami to kyoten*, edited by Sunayama Minoru, Ozaki Masaharu, and Kikuchi Noritaka (Yuzankaku Publishing, 2000), pp.76-92.

(3) *Book of Rites*, Chapter 9 (Meiji Shoin Publishing, 1979), p.327.

(4) *Tai-ping jing*: Chapter 39 (Wang Ming, ed., *Taiping jing hejiao*, Zhonghua Shuju Publishing, 1960), p.70.

(5) *Tai-ping jing*, Chapter 37, p.54

(6) *Book of Han*, Chapter 56 (Zhonghua Shuju Publishing, 1962), p.2498.

(7) *ibid*., p.2503.

(8) *Yi-jing*, Book 1, Chapter 2 (Meiji Shoin Publishing, 1987), p.175.

(9) *Long Āgama Sutra*, Chapter 21 (Taisho Buddhist Canon, Volume 1), p.137b.